Burkhard’s Time of the Italian Renaissance

Every period of civilization which forms a complete and consistent whole manifests itself not only in political life, in religion, art, and science, but also sets its characteristic stamp on social life. Thus the Middle Ages had their courtly and aristocratic manners and etiquette, differing but little in the various countries of Europe, as well as their peculiar forms of middle-class life.

Italian customs at the time of the Renaissance offer in these respects the sharpest contrasts to medievalism. The foundation on which they rest is wholly different. Social intercourse in its highest and most perfect form now ignored all distinctions of caste, and was based simply on the existence of an educated class as we now understand the word. Birth and origin were without influence, unless combined with leisure and inherited wealth. Yet this assertion must not be taken in an absolute and unqualified sense, since medieval distinctions still sometimes made themselves felt to a greater or less degree, if only as a means of maintaining equality with the aristocratic pretensions of the less advanced countries of Europe. But the main current of the time went steadily towards the fusion of classes in the modern sense of the phrase.

The fact was of vital importance that, from certainly the twelfth century onwards, the nobles and the burghers dwelt together within the walls of the cities. The interests and pleasures of both classes were thus identified, and the feudal lord learned to look at society from another point of view than that of his mountain castle. The Church, too, in Italy never suffered itself, as in northern countries, to be used as a means of providing for the younger sons of noble families. Bishoprics, abbacies, and canonries were often given from the most unworthy motives, but still not according to the pedigrees of the applicants; and if the bishops in Italy were more numerous, poorer, and, as a rule, destitute of all sovereign rights, they still lived in the cities where their cathedrals stood, and formed, together with their chapters, an important element in the cultivated society of the place. In the age of despots and absolute princes which followed, the nobility in most of the cities had the motives and the leisure to give themselves up to a private life free from the political danger and adorned with all that was elegant and enjoyable, but at the same time hardly distinguishable from that of the wealthy burgher. And after the time of Dante, when the new poetry and literature were in the hands of all Italy, when to this was added the revival of ancient culture and the new interest in man as such, when the successful Condottiere became a prince, and not only good birth, but legitimate birth, ceased to be indispensable for a throne, it might well seem that the age of equality had dawned, and the belief in nobility vanished for ever.

From a theoretical point of view, when the appeal was made to antiquity, the conception of nobility could be both justified and condemned from Aristotle alone. Dante, for example, derives from Aristotle's definition, 'Nobility rests on excellence and inherited wealth,' his own saying, 'Nobility rests on personal excellence or on that of forefathers.' But elsewhere he is not satisfied with this conclusion. He blames himself, because even in Paradise, while talking with his ancestor Cacciaguida, he made mention of his noble origin, which is but a mantle from which time is ever cutting something away, unless we ourselves add daily fresh worth to it. And in the 'Convito' he disconnects 'nobile' and 'nobilita' from every condition of birth, and identifies the idea with the capacity for moral and intellectual eminence, laying a special stress on high culture by calling 'nobilita' the sister of 'filosofia.'

And as time went on, the greater the influence of humanism on the Italian mind, the firmer and more widespread became the conviction that birth decides nothing as to the goodness or badness of a man. In the fifteenth century this was the prevailing opinion. Poggio, in his dialogue 'On nobility,' agrees with his interlocutors -- Niccoló Niccoli, and Lorenzo Medici, brother of the great Cosimo -- that there is no other nobility than that of personal merit.

The keenest shafts of his ridicule are directed against much of what vulgar prejudice thinks indispensable to an aristocratic life. 'A man is !111 the farther removed from true nobility, the longer his forefathers have plied the trade of brigands. The taste for hawking and hunting saviors no more of nobility than the nests and lairs of the hunted creatures of spikenard. The cultivation of the soil, as practiced by the ancients, would be much nobler than this senseless wandering through the hills and woods, by which men make themselves like to the brutes than to the reasonable creatures. It may serve well enough as a recreation, but not as the business of a lifetime.' The life of the English and French chivalry in the country or in the woody fastnesses seems to him thoroughly ignoble, and worst of all the doings of the robber-knights of Germany. Lorenzo here begins to take the part of the nobility, but not -- which is characteristic -- appealing to any natural sentiment in its favor, but because Aristotle in the fifth book of the Politics recognizes the nobility as existent, and defines it as resting on excellence and inherited wealth. To this Niccoli retorts that Aristotle gives this not as his own conviction, but as the popular impression; in his Ethics, where he speaks as he thinks, he calls him noble who strives after that which is truly good. Lorenzo urges upon him vainly that the Greek word for nobility (Eugeneia) means good birth; Niccoli thinks the Roman word 'nobilis' (i.e. remark- able) a better one, since it makes nobility depend on a man's deeds. Together with these discussions, we find a sketch of the conditions of the nobles in various parts of Italy. In Naples they will not work, and busy themselves neither with their own estates nor with trade and commerce, which they hold to be discreditable; they either loiter at home or ride about on horseback. The Roman nobility also despise trade, but farm their own property; the cultivation of the land even opens the way to a title; it is a respectable but boorish nobility. In Lombardy the nobles live upon the rent of their inherited estates; descent and the abstinence from any regular calling, constitute nobility. In Venice, the 'nobili,' the ruling caste, were all merchants. Similarly in Genoa the nobles and non-nobles were alike merchants and sailors, and only separated by their birth: some few of the former, it is true, still lurked as brigands in their mountain castles. In Florence a part of the old nobility had devoted themselves to trade; another, and certainly by far the smaller part, enjoyed the satisfaction of their titles, and spent their time, either in nothing at all, or else in hunting and hawking.

The decisive fact was, that nearly everywhere in Italy, even those who might be disposed to pride themselves on their birth could not make good the claims against the power of culture and of wealth, and that their privileges in politics and at court were not sufficient to encourage any strong feeling of caste. Venice offers only an apparent exception to this rule, for there the 'nobili' led the same life as their fellow-citizens, and were distinguished by few honorary privileges. The case was certainly different at Naples, which the strict isolation and the ostentatious vanity of its nobility excluded, above all other causes, from the spiritual movement of the Renaissance. The traditions of medieval Lombardy and Normandy, and the French aristocratic influences which followed, all tended in this direction; and the Aragonese government, which was established by the middle of the fifteenth century, completed the work, and accomplished in Naples what followed a hundred years later in the rest of Italy -- a social transformation in obedience to Spanish ideas, of which the chief features were the contempt for work and the passion for titles. The effect of this new influence was evident, even in the smaller towns, before the year 1500. We hear complaints from La Cava that the place had been proverbially rich, as long as it was filled with masons and weavers; whilst now, since instead of looms and trowels nothing but spurs, stirrups and gilded belts was to be seen, since everybody was trying to become Doctor of Laws or of Medicine, Notary, Officer or Knight, the most intolerable poverty prevailed.

In Florence an analogous change appears to have taken place by the time of Cosimo, the first Grand Duke; he is thanked for adopting the young people, who now despise trade and commerce, as knights of his order of St. Stephen. This goes straight in the teeth of the good old Florentine custom, by which fathers left property to their children on the condition that they should have some occupation. But a mania for titles of a curious and ludicrous sort sometimes crossed and thwarted, especially among the Florentines, the leveling influence of art and culture. This was the passion hood, which became one of the most striking follies at a time when the dignity itself had lost every significance.

'A few years ago,' writes Franco Sacchetti, towards the end of the fourteenth century, 'everybody saw how all the workpeople down to the bakers, how all the wool-carders, usurers money-changers and blackguards of all description, became knights. Why should an official need knighthood when he goes to preside over some little provincial town? What has this title to do with any ordinary bread-winning pursuit? How art thou sunken, unhappy dignity! Of all the long list of knightly duties, what single one do these knights of ours discharge? I wished to speak of these things that the reader might see that knighthood is dead. And as we have gone so far as to confer the honor upon dead men, why not upon figures of wood and stone, and why not upon an ox?' The stories which Sacchetti tells by way of illustration speak plainly enough. There we read how Bernabo Visconti knighted the victor in a drunken brawl, and then did the same derisively to the vanquished; how Ger- man knights with their decorated helmets and devices were ridiculed -- and more of the same kind. At a later period Poggio makes merry over the many knights of his day without a horse and without military training. Those who wished to assert the privilege of the order, and ride out with lance and colors, found in Florence that they might have to face the government as well as the jokers.

On considering the matter more closely, we shall find that this belated chivalry, independent of all nobility of birth, though partly the fruit of an insane passion for titles, had nevertheless another and a better side. Tournaments had not yet ceased to be practiced, and no one could take part in them who was not a knight. But the combat in the lists, and especially the difficult and perilous tilting with the lance, offered a favorable opportunity for the display of strength, skill, and courage, which no one, whatever might be his origin, would willingly neglect in an age which laid such stress on personal merit.

It was in vain that from the time of Petrarch downwards the tournament was denounced as a dangerous folly. No one was converted by the pathetic appeal of the poet: 'In what book do we read that Scipio and Caesar were skilled at the joust?' The practice became more and more popular in Florence. Every honest citizen came to consider his tournament -- now, no doubt, less dangerous than formerly -- as a fashionable sport. Franco Sacchetti has left us a ludicrous picture of one of these holiday cavaliers -- a notary seventy years old. He rides out on horseback to Peretola, where the tournament was cheap, on a jade hired from a dyer. A thistle is stuck by some wag under the tail of the steed, who takes fright, runs away, and carries the helmeted rider, bruised and shaken, back into the city. The inevitable conclusion of the story is a severe curtain-lecture from the wife, who is not a little enraged at these break-neck follies of her husband.

It may be mentioned in conclusion that a passionate interest in this sport was displayed by the Medici, as if they wished to show -- private citizens as they were, without noble blood in their veins -- that the society which surrounded them was in no respect inferior to a Court. Even under Cosimo (1459), and afterwards under the elder Pietro, brilliant tournaments were held at Florence. The younger Pietro neglected the duties of government for these amusements and would never suffer himself to be painted except clad in armor. The same practice prevailed at the Court of Alexander VI, and when the Cardinal Ascanio Sforza asked the Turkish Prince Djem how he liked the spectacle, the barbarian replied with much discretion that such combats in his country only took place among slaves, since then, in the case of accident, nobody was the worse for it. The Oriental was unconsciously in accord with the old Romans in condemning the manners of the Middle Ages.

Apart, however, from this particular prop of knighthood, we find here and there in Italy, for example at Ferrara, orders of courtiers whose members had a right to the title of *Cavaliere.*

But, great as were individual ambitions, and the vanities of nobles and knights, it remains a fact that the Italian nobility took its place in the centre of social life, and not at the extremity. We find it habitually mixing with other classes on a footing of perfect equality, and seeking its natural allies in culture and intelligence. It is true that for the courtier a certain rank of nobility was required, but this exigence is expressly declared to be caused by a prejudice rooted in the public mind -- 'per l'opinion universale' -- and never was held to imply the belief that the personal worth of one who was not of noble blood was in any degree lessened thereby, nor did it follow from this rule that the prince was limited to the nobility for his society. It meant simply that the perfect man -- the true courtier -- should not be wanting in any conceivable advantage, and therefore not in this. If in all the relations of life he was specially bound to maintain a dignified and reserved demeanor, the reason was not found in the blood which flowed in h-s veins, but in the perfection of manner which was demanded from him. We are here in the presence of a modern distinctiori, based on culture and on wealth, but on the latter solely because it enables men to devote their life to the former, and effectually to promote its interests and advancement.